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ABSTRACT

This booklet is designed to help people understand and interact better with people with autism, through descriptions and suggestions for dealing with 33 autistic behaviors. First, the booklet provides a simple list, or index, of the 33 behaviors. Then, for each behavior, the typical "common response" (but not helpful) response is given, along with the autistic interpretation of the behavior and a variety of suggestions for helpful responses. Examples of behaviors analyzed include: person is rigid and inflexible, wanting everything scheduled and consistent; person has trouble solving simple everyday problems; person does not respond when asked to do something; person wants to do things immediately; person follows certain rituals compulsively; and person has a history of toileting problems. In the first example cited "person is rigid" the common response provided is "person has to learn to fit in"; the autistic interpretation is "person is trying to keep the world manageable"; the helpful responses included "teach flexibility by introducing change slowly," "use pictures and written schedules," and "provide choices," etc. (DB)

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Helpful Responses to Some of the Behaviors of Individuals with Autism

by Nancy Dalrymple

1992

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How To Use This Booklet

This booklet was developed to help people understand the person with autism better. Too often judgments and interpretations are made without any knowledge of autism. Hopefully, the booklet will provide specific information about autism that will be useful and encourage people to seek out more information.

Interacting with our peers and with children is often based on our passed experiences, biases, and prejudices. People who appear to be behaving oddly are immediately suspect. Perhaps being suspect by appearances is helpful for self protection. However, take time to find out more and go beyond initial appearances to discover more about the person. Consider your own stereotypic responses and how they might contribute to keeping people with disabilities as nonfunctional or dysfunctional members of our society.

The more helpful responses that are listed are not meant to be comprehensive in nature nor do they discuss specific teaching strategies. They do provide some useful strategies that anyone can implement. Themes such as visuals, modeling, and teaching relaxation, communication, and social skills are repeated throughout. There is much more available about these topics.

There is overlap in the behaviors. The order was determined to allow for some grouping of similar behaviors, but that was somewhat arbitrary. Therefore, an index is provided to help the reader locate specific behaviors that might apply to a specific person with autism, or specific behaviors that bother some people who interact with them.

This paper could be used for group discussion, individual interactions, or as an introduction to help keep people from falling into the "common response" pattern. Hopefully, those who have read it will pause and consider, and give a helpful response.

Teach rather than judge. Model rather than criticize. Provide supports rather than labels.

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Behavior: Person is rigid and inflexible, wanting everything scheduled and consistent.

Common Response: Person has to learn to fit in; everything can't be designed just for her.

Autism Interpretation: The person is trying to keep the world manageable and relies on sameness to be able to cope.

Helpful Responses:

- Teach flexibility by introducing change slowly, by rewarding adaptability, and by providing exact information about alternative choices.
- Use pictured and written schedules to give information.
- Provide choices and teach choice-making.
- Provide accurate, understandable information *BEFORE* the change or event.

Behavior: Person insists on having her own way and desires with no thought of what others may want or need.

Common Responses: Person is demanding, obstinate, and very annoying. She is inconsiderate and selfish.

Autism Interpretation: The person only views the world from the perspective of self and doesn't have the ability to put self in the perspective of another.

Helpful Responses:

- Teach social interaction through specific rules, scripts, and practice.
- Help the person expand interests and activities through positive teaching techniques. Meaningful activities provide the person with motivation for social interaction.
- Select one or two common situations and specifically teach a helpful, considerate response to each. Practice across people and places to assure generalization.
- Reinforce waiting, turn-taking, and sharing.

Behavior: Person talks about a limited number of topics or wants to do a limited number of activities.

Common Responses: Person is boring and annoying. All he ever thinks of is himself.

Autism Interpretation: The person continues to do familiar, pleasurable activities due to sensory, social, and communication impairments which limit the repertoire of activities and interests.

Helpful Responses:

- Introduce the person to meaningful activities by doing the activities with the person, modeling and sharing.
- Desensitize to new, unfamiliar activities so the person can have the opportunity to enjoy activities over time. Even when the person is familiar it will take time before the individual feels comfortable enough to benefit from teaching and participating.
- Plan times when the person is free to engage in pleasurable, self-selected activities.
- Use strengths and interests to expand repertoire.
- Start where the person can be successful.

Behavior: Person has trouble solving a simple everyday problem.

Common Response: Person does not try and wants to be dependent or person is lazy or doesn't care.

Autism Interpretation: The person may have never experienced this exact situation with the same materials before, may not perceive what is being asked or may not understand the meaning or usefulness of the task.

Helpful Responses:

- Teach through modeling and consistent step by step procedures that are visually represented.
- Make sure the person is taught in the setting where the skill is used and where the outcome can be understood and applied.
- Vary teaching settings/people to help the person generalize the skill.

Behavior: Person prefers repetitive actions and seems to forget activities with longer sequences.

Common Response: Person does not concentrate and pay attention.

Autism Interpretation: Short-term memory may be impaired when remembering longer sequences or the person may have attention diverted during longer sequences and be unable to resume.

Helpful Responses:

- Provide visual cues for sequences.
- Build on the person's preferred actions by adding one step at a time.
- Provide check off systems for longer sequences.
- Chunk several steps together when the sequence is learned and provide a new cue to define all the steps. Keep the step by step cues in place as back-up.

Behavior: Person becomes agitated when corrected or when she feels she has made a mistake.

Common Responses: Person is uncooperative, belligerent, and oppositional. Person is too sensitive and difficult to work with; has no manners.

Autism Interpretation: The person is trying to do things the way she perceives they need to be done. Correction is often given in the negative and doesn't let the person know what to do to correct the situation. Sometimes the person perceives the need to have everything in the environment or the task in a certain order and changing it creates anxiety. The person may also fear failure, thus increasing anxiety.

Helpful Responses:

- Anticipate as much as possible and give information beforehand in visual, concrete form to help the person succeed.
- Provide positive feedback for correct steps.
- Provide visual information about how to identify and correct a mistake through written, pictured, diagram, or modeled form, moving toward self-monitoring.
- Present corrections in a non-threatening, neutral tone and provide choices for correction or for starting over. Reassure the person that everyone makes mistakes, even pointing out your own.

Behavior: The person leaves tasks before they are completed.

Common Responses: The person is lazy and non-compliant; therefore not a good candidate for competitive employment. The person isn't trying. He is bored, hyperactive, only does what he wants to do, and has a short attention span.

Autism Interpretation: The person does not understand what completion means or when it is okay to take a break. There may be some distracting stimuli that is bothering the person or the person is having trouble with the task and s/he doesn't know how to ask for help. People with autism need specific, concrete ways to know the expectations of an activity or job. Their previous experience, and perceptual and communication problems may be providing a set "script" that they are transferring to the current activity.

Helpful Responses:

- Use visual means such as templates, jigs, charts, counters, or mark-off steps to provide concrete meaning to the concept, "finish".
- Negotiate ahead of time and work from a certain amount to be completed, either using concrete items or a check off system.
- Teach the person a way to ask for help and specific situations in which to ask for help, such as not being able to find something that is needed.
- Teach the person when "break times" are scheduled by providing a daily schedule that goes by times or amounts. The break routine can be sequenced separately. Provide breaks often, if needed.
- Provide concrete information, possibly with checks, clocks, or timers about when break is finished and when it's time to work on a regular basis. Provide this information ahead of time.

Behavior: Person does not move when asked to do something.

Common Responses: Person is non-compliant and stubborn. Person does things only when s/he wants to. Person wants attention.

Autism Interpretation: The person may not know what is going to happen next, may not have processed the information or may have a delay in processing. The person may not be able to shift attention to the new stimuli, or may not be able to start the motor response. The person may also want to have more choice of when he does things, and fewer directives. The person may be expressing refusal and the reason for the refusal must be investigated.

Helpful Responses:

- Allow processing time. Provide touch cues and /or gestures.
- Teach ways to indicate refusal more directly.
- Provide visual schedules to let the person know the order of events.
- Provide visual choices for order of activities, reinforcers, and other things about which the person can make decisions.
- Cue the person with objects, gestures, pictures, and written messages, rather than repetitive and/or long verbal messages.
- Do more activities with the person, less directing.
- Cut down on verbal instructions; model and participate more with the person.

Behavior: Person sometimes does not initiate simple motor activities that he knows how to do.

Common Response: Person is lazy, incompetent, and unreliable.

Autism Interpretation: The person may be having a difficult day and "tuned-out" stimuli, the person could be having seizure activity, problems with motor planning, or health problems.

Helpful Responses:

- Provide more supports in the form of environmental cues and/or physical prompts.
- Provide a supportive peer to model and help facilitate with the person.
- Check out possible medical issues; seizures, medication, sleep, illness.

Behavior: The person needs help, but doesn't ask for it - just sits or does it wrong.

Common Responses: Person has no initiative, is lazy, and doesn't care about work. Person is overly dependent.

Autism Interpretation: The person doesn't know how to initiate asking for help and may not be able to use verbal or nonverbal skills for communicating from one situation to another unless specifically taught.

Helpful Responses:

- Teach the person how to ask for help by setting up situations for practice in varied situations with various people. Use a means that works for this person; cue cards, objects or modeling are useful.
- Use videos to identify when help is needed and to rehearse strategies for asking.
- Teach working accurately by comparing to a model. Teach working continually through reinforcement.

Behavior: Person wants to do things immediately.

Common Responses: Person is selfish and only thinks of himself. Person is impatient and annoying.

Autism Interpretation: The person doesn't have an understanding of the passage of time. "Feeling" what a minute is, often no different than "feeling" an hour. When the person knows something is going to happen or that it should happen at a certain time, the person thinks that it should happen now.

Helpful Responses:

- Provide timers, either that click off minutes or that visually move sand or oil, or a personal clock or watch to give the person accurate information about passage of time.
- Make sure activities have beginnings and endings that are clear to the person.
- Teach waiting strategies such as deep breathing or looking through a magazine that is carried in a backpack.
- Introduce flexibility training as the person becomes more aware of intervals of time.

Behavior: Person does the opposite of the directive, especially when negation is used.

Common Response: Person is trying to get at you, is defiant, doesn't mind, and is a behavior problem.

Autism Interpretation: The person is slow to process verbal information and either may not have heard you or did not understand completely. Negation tells a person what NOT to do, but offers little information about what TO DO.

Helpful Responses:

- Use positive statements about what TO DO.
- Talk SLOWLY and CLEARLY.
- Give the person time to process.
- Use proximity, gestures, and visuals to help the person understand.

Behavior: Person becomes upset when things change - time, place, people

Common Responses: Person is rigid and it is impossible to control everything for him. He will have to learn to adjust.

Autism Interpretation: The person's anxiety is raised from lack of understanding about what is happening, who to look to for information, or where things are located. He becomes confused when the routine is changed.

Helpful Responses:

- Involve the person in the changes by preparing with him/her ahead of time.
- Provide choices for replacement activities when possible.
- Provide visual information about changes, written, calendars, sequences, and pictures beforehand.
- Give person time to process, understand, and accept. Teach flexibility through planned experiences.
- Desensitize the person to new places, activities, things, and people.

Behavior: Person paces back and forth.

Common Responses: Person is trying to get out of what she is supposed to be doing, is disruptive and trying to get all the attention. The person is inattentive and hyperactive.

Autism Interpretation: The person may be filling "down" or "waiting" free-time, since many people with autism don't know what to do in free or unstructured time. The person may need an outlet for a high activity level or may be reacting to stressful situations.

Helpful Responses:

- Provide more exercise and movement activities. Identify appropriate time and place to pace.
- Teach an individualized relaxation routine when the persons is calm and practice several times a day.
- Organize the learning environment and sequence the learning steps so the learner knows exactly what, where, and how to do each activity.
- Provide the person choices to help structure free time.
- Try to determine if the person is trying to communicate something and teach direct communication strategies.
- Teach activities that the person can do in free time with others and alone.
- Plan partial participation with shorter sitting times.

Behavior: Person follows certain rituals compulsively.

Common Response: Person is obsessive/compulsive. Person is inconsiderate of others and selfish.

Autism Interpretation: The person is trying to create order and structure in the environment and needs help to try a new way or new things.

Helpful Responses:

- Give accurate information about when and where the ritual is acceptable and appropriate.
- Provide visual reminders of routines that can be checked off when completed. Provide strong individualized reinforcers.
- Structure the environment to help the person follow a routine that gives cues and is functional for that person.
- Teach more functional behaviors and skills, active and participatory.
- Teach new activities over a period of time. This will allow the person an opportunity to learn to like the activity.

Behavior: Person closes doors and cupboards, straightens things, and insists on things being in certain places regardless of what other people want.

Common Response: Person is obsessive/compulsive and does not consider others. Person is a pain to be around.

Autism Interpretation: The person is trying to cope by ordering the environment and doesn't understand that other people may need or want something different.

Helpful Responses:

- Ignore or learn to cope with those behaviors that do not matter or bother anyone.
- Use rules and environmental, pictured, and written cues to give the person specific information.
- Set up times in the daily schedule for doing these activities, clearly defining time frames.
- Use the need to straighten and order to the person's and everyone else's advantage, as much as possible.

Behavior: Person's abilities seem to fluctuate from day to day.

Common Responses: Person is trying to fool you and is lazy. He remembers only what he wants to, and only works when he wants to.

Autism Interpretation: The person does function differently from day to day, probably due to the way his body is functioning allowing him to concentrate more or less and process more or less. Subtle as well as obvious changes and external stimuli may also affect the person's abilities. Anxiety may also inhibit learning. Short-term memory may be impaired.

Helpful Responses:

- Be consistent, even if the person is not.
- Teach relaxation techniques to reduce anxiety levels.
- Provide more supports on more difficult days.
- Keep accurate information to pick up possible patterns needing extra support.

Behavior: Person stays in his room or in his home most of the time, refusing to leave.

Common Responses: Person does not like to go out and is non-compliant. Person likes to be alone and does not like to be with people.

Autism Interpretation: The person may be a non-initiator, and may only feel safe in his room. He may not know what else to do or may not know what the options are.

Helpful Responses:

- Provide the person with a visual schedule that sequences the activities of the day. Make sure there are lots of activities that the person likes, is good at doing, and that have meaning to the person.
- Participate in the place where the person is comfortable, slowly increasing time and transitioning to other areas.
- Make sure the person becomes familiar with the activities and objects through practice and desensitization if necessary.
- Pair the person with a supportive peer.
- Facilitate an activity with a peer. Choose an activity of interest to both.

Behavior: Person uses eye contact in unusual ways -sometimes avoiding, sometimes staring.

Common Response: Person is shy, unsociable, and difficult to be around.

Autism Interpretation: Eye contact with other people is often difficult for people with autism. They often use peripheral vision rather than straight on vision. Perhaps they are unable to read the subtle cues of people's faces, therefore eye contact is distracting.

Helpful Responses:

- Don't worry about eye contact. As the person becomes more confident he will look at what he needs to gain information.
- Help the person know what to focus attention on. Cue with gestures or words when needed. Teach social cues.

Behavior: Person jumps and pulls back when physically assisted.

Common Interpretation: Person is noncompliant and uncooperative.

Autism Interpretation: The person is very sensitive to touch especially when not expecting the touch or when he doesn't know the person who is touching. Sometimes deep touching is accepted better than soft, light touch. Person may be expressing refusal.

Helpful Responses:

- Ask the person if you can help or at least give him/her information about what you are going to do.
- Provide tactile experiences that gradually desensitize the person to various touching.
- Analyze communicative intent, and teach more direct ways to communicate.
- Demonstrate an activity rather than physically assist. Enlist peers as well.

Behavior: Person holds hands and arms over his ears. He yells when he hears certain noises.

Common Response: Person is strange or weird; trying to be difficult.

Autism Interpretation: The person is very sensitive to sounds to the point of pain. The person reacts to certain pitches and tones, but not to others. This will vary from day to day and in various settings.

Helpful Responses:

- Gradually desensitize the person to sounds that are bothersome. Provide information about the sound, when it will happen, and how to get away from it.
- Provide appropriate ways to escape sounds when needed, such as headphones, ear plugs, or quiet areas.

Behavior: Person has a narrow range of emotions, demonstrates few examples of empathy, and laughs when others are hurt or in trouble.

Common Responses: Person, is selfish and inconsiderate. Person thinks others mistakes are funny and makes fun of others.

Autism Interpretation: The person isn't able to take the perspective of someone else and often reacts from anxiety rather than emotion. Therefore, laughing can often be a sign of anxiety.

Helpful Responses:

- Interpret emotions and actions accurately to the person. Use key phrases.
- Label and express emotions in consistent ways. Teach a practice specific phrases to express to others when they have problems such as, "Are you okay?"
- Practice expressing social bids and caring expressions.

Behavior: Person does not appear to understand how or why his actions affect someone else.

Common Responses: Person does not think of others. He just acts and does not care. Person is deliberately mean.

Autism Interpretation: The inability to put self in someone else's place and to empathize is characteristic of autism. Learning is concrete and sequential and it's very difficult to translate feelings and meaning from another perspective.

Helpful Responses:

- Provide clear, specific, positively stated rules rather than asking the person with autism to think how that made someone else feel.
- Interpret clearly concisely and precisely for the person with autism to help him focus on salient cues in social situations.
- Provide and practice social scripts or stories that teach appropriate social behaviors. Role play.

Behavior: Person becomes so agitated that he aggresses, self injures, and destroys property.

Common Responses: Person is dangerous to himself and others. He is uncontrollable.

Autism Interpretation: The reason for the agitation and the communicative purpose of the behaviors must be determined in order to teach the person more appropriate behaviors.

Helpful Responses:

- The person must have a means to express basic wants and needs that everyone understands and he must be taught to use the means successfully, such as , "I need to leave," or "Let me out."
- Teach a relaxation routine to use when agitation begins such as deep breathing, muscle relaxation, or rocking in a chair.
- Sensory, social, and other needs of the person must be met.
- Activities and expectations must be clearly defined and meaningful to the person.

Behavior: Person often does not express basic wants and needs to another person.

Common Response: Person is a loner who does not want to be with others or even to interact with others.

Autism Interpretation: Initiating interaction of any type is difficult for many people with autism. The outcome is uncertain unless the person is well known to the individual with autism. Knowing who, how, and when to approach along with how to be understood are overwhelming.

Helpful Responses:

- Positively reinforce initiations and initiative attempts.
- The person must have means to communicate that are reliable across people and settings.
- Practice communicating and succeeding in structured activities that are motivating to the person with responsive communicative partners.
- Develop peer advocates who facilitate communication through shared interests.

Behavior: Person repeats stories, TV or movie scripts, phrases, or words over and over in a rote way.

Common Responses: Person is selfish and always needing attention. Person monopolizes the conversation and is trying to "get at" others. Person is smart and trying to be annoying.

Autism Interpretation: The person perseverates on topics, words,and phrases that he knows, that are pleasing to him, that calm him, just because they are familiar. He may not know what else to talk about and has not learned how to carry on a reciprocal communication exchange.

Helpful Responses:

- Provide alternative ways to help the person learn topics to talk about by using written choices, pictures, TV and newspapers.
- Change activities, do new activities.
- Create stories about real life situations.
- Practice reciprocal conversation and topic maintenance; might even videotape for practice and rehearsal.

Behavior: Person repeatedly asks certain questions.

Common Response: Person is trying to get attention and/or annoy adults.

Autism Interpretation: The person needs verification that what she is asking will really occur. The person may not have other ways to initiate a conversation and isn't able to engage in a reciprocal conversation.

Helpful Responses:

- Provide the person with accurate information before an activity takes place with visuals that sequence events.
- Write out answers to questions for the person's reference.
- Teach other forms of communication.
- List other possible topics on a notecard pocket-sized notebook, or small wipe-off board.

Behavior: Person discusses private topics with everyone.

Common Responses: He knows better, but does not pay attention. He wants attention.

Autism Interpretation: The person doesn't understand the concept of private topics, private behaviors, and private places.

Helpful Responses:

- Be neutral, non-judgmental, and reactive.
- Provide clear-cut rules presented in specific, concrete, visual form to help the person understand what is private, where private behaviors are done, when they are done, and with whom. Begin teaching early.

Behavior: Person stares at lights and fans, flaps arms, spins objects.

Common Response: Person is off in another world and very retarded.

Autism Interpretation: Person has a need for sensory stimuli or is over stimulated by certain sensory input. Person may be using this activity as a way to cope with a confusing world.

Helpful Responses:

- Provide functional, sensory experiences.
- Teach the person ways to relax and phrases that take her through the process. Use visuals as supports.
- Provide functional, interesting activities to engage attention.

Behavior: Person is upset by large spaces, stairs, elevators, etc.

Common Responses: Person is difficult to take anywhere and should stay at home.

Autism Interpretation: The person has depth and spatial sensory difficulties.

Helpful Responses:

- Desensitize to places and areas that are problems.
- Practice in real situations with support.
- Give the person accurate information about what is happening and what will happen.
- Choose times when crowds, noise etc. are at a minimum, especially in settings.

Behavior: Person smells things or tastes inedibles.

Common Responses: Person is strange or in an early stage of development.

Autism Interpretation: The person needs to use the senses or smell and taste to learn more about the world.

Helpful Responses:

- Provide materials with odors that are appropriate to smell.
- Provide free access to certain edibles.
- Familiarize the person to new environments and use of materials.
- Redirect to appropriate materials and activities.

Behavior: Person has a history of toileting problems.

Common Responses: Person is unpleasant to be around, doesn't try, has accidents to get attention or get back at someone.

Autism Interpretation: The person with autism often receives confusing messages about toileting. Social pressure isn't understood, timing is off, people being angry creates anxiety, and body signals aren't processed.

Helpful Responses:

- Set up toileting routines around daily events, rather than by the clock. This is easier and more natural.
- Desensitize to bathroom, toilet, and sitting when needed.
- Follow a set routine with set cues, visual and environmental, such as pictures and timers.
- Teach relaxation routines to use while toileting. Make environment comfortable.
- Reinforce with something used only during toileting. Remain calm.

Behavior: Person has unusual sleeping patterns.

Common Response: Person was spoiled as a child.

Autism Interpretation: The person's internal clock may work differently at times or the person may be very sensitive to certain cues at night like a furnace fan or garage door.

Helpful Responses:

- Follow a set bedtime routine that is calming and dependable. This might include a calming snack and story.
- Provide materials that are comfortable and soothing.
- Provide a consistent background noise like an air filter, soft music, or fan, if these are calming.
- If the person wakes up, follow a set procedure of taking care of needs, then redirecting to bed.